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Letter dated 1 July 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

Upon instructions from my Government, I have the honour to transmit to you herewith a statement delivered at the opening of the World Conference on Higher Education, convened by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), on 23 June 2003 by Her Highness Sheikha Mozah bint Nasser Al-Misnad, the Consort of His Highness the Emir of the State of Qatar, and the UNESCO Special Envoy of Goodwill and Higher Education, for the establishment of the International Fund for Iraqi Higher Education.

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Nassir Abdulaziz **Al-Nasser**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative

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Annex to the letter dated 1 July 2003 from the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

[Original: Arabic and English]

I am honoured to join you to open the World Conference on Higher Education, convened by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Today, as we are examining our work from 1998 to date, we will assess how our policies have been translated into actions and programmes. Such reflection is an essential element of education, for only by reflecting on practice can logical theory be generated. Theory and plans alone are irrelevant without concrete and soundly grounded procedures that put this theory into action.

The central theme driving our discussion today is the need for the global community to assume responsibility for reform and innovation in education in order to meet the challenges of globalization, democratization and knowledge-based societies. Indeed, it is this responsibility and the dynamic relationship between democracy and education that I would like to reflect upon.

Today, in our troubled world, we place much faith in the power of education to produce responsible citizens committed to peace, global understanding, harmony and true democracy. Indeed, in the 1998 World Declaration we, at UNESCO, declared that "education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace". However, I would like to add that not only is education a pillar of democracy, but democracy is a pillar of education. Without well-educated citizens, willing to participate in the affairs of their countries, democracy cannot thrive. On the contrary, it will remain an empty theatre of elected seats. However, with well-educated citizens, critically charting the course of their future, this theatre is transformed into an interactive performance. Likewise, if there is no participatory democracy, the critical thinking skills and creativity essential for education are not fostered, and the very quality and integrity of education suffers. The educated citizen in a democratic society is a participant, not a spectator, and democracy itself is the process by which the performance of civil society is acted out.

I believe higher education, in particular, plays a vital role in the promotion and sustenance of democratic societies. Indeed, it provides nourishment for critical and analytical thinking, freedom of expression and debate. I believe institutes of higher education ought to be havens of innovative thought that propel society towards change, diversity and adaptation. Institutes of higher education ought to be safe environments for all citizens who are capable, regardless of individual, gender or ethnic differences, of debating and expressing their thoughts in a collaborative and progressive environment. Indeed, institutes of higher education are vehicles for the promotion of a culture of quality that integrates the outcome of research into all facets of society. Institutes of higher education serve as the incubator for democratic values and practices essential for the sustenance of the very principles of democracy. Therefore, it is important that these institutions be promoted and accorded the autonomy and support needed to fulfil their mission.

In my country, Qatar, we have thought deeply about these issues as we are in the process of transforming both our educational institutions and our political structure. Today, I would like to share with you some of our experiences. Qatar, like

other countries in this highly competitive world, is insisting on finding its own path towards sustainable development, democracy, and the preservation of its cultural integrity. In Qatar, we have begun a series of radical educational changes at all levels: from basic education, to primary and secondary schooling, to higher education structures.

We realized that in order to face the demands of a knowledge-based global economy, the traditional ways of teaching and learning had to be changed. Our education system had to become more dynamic and creative. We realized the need to challenge and stimulate our citizens' intellects. We also realized that our citizens needed to be equipped with the necessary tools that would enable them to interact and compete effectively in the domestic and global culture and economy.

The responsibility we have placed on educational institutions in Qatar is great, because we comprehend that education plays a critical role in engineering the future of our society. We focused on four major premises in designing our course: international alliances, diversity of options, innovative educational systems, and access based on quality standards.

First, we decided to forge strong alliances with established, international educational institutions and agencies, to bring their expertise into our country, initiating a process of brain gain rather than brain drain.

Second, we decided to move from a State-sponsored monopolistic mode to a comprehensive system with various options that encourage competition throughout all levels of the educational system.

Third, we focused on the needs of sustainable development and envisioned educational systems and consortia that can service these needs. We invited top quality universities in their fields to provide a venue for scholars to share relevant research that is driven by the specific needs of our developing society.

And finally, we considered the issue of equity and developed policies to provide scholarships to qualified students and to encourage both men and women to cross the barriers of gender-bound professions.

In order to achieve these goals we had to start from our basic education and extend these changes to our higher education system. That is why we started the ongoing reforms in our primary and secondary schools. A system based on the charter school model was introduced where schools compete with each other to encourage diversity of choice, parental participation and accountability.

At the post-secondary level, the State-sponsored University is undergoing intense rejuvenation. Likewise, private investment has been encouraged to invite top quality universities to establish campuses in Qatar. Schools like Cornell Medical College, Virginia Commonwealth University and Texas A&M are establishing campuses in Qatar to promote research and education in the fields of medicine, design art and engineering. Also, institutes for technical education have been established. Other schools for business and computer sciences are being planned. Further, the Science and Technology Park will draw upon the resources of all these entities, and others yet to come, to build partnerships between academic institutions, business and industry. In addition, the Rand Public Policy Institute-Qatar, in cooperation with our national reform team, will provide in-depth, analytical research into various facets of our development.

Qatar is firmly committed to reconsidering archaic methods of education in order to better meet the needs of our changing society. I imagine that the outcomes of these reforms will be phenomenal, not just in the academic and economic development of our country and region but in the development of our most important resource — our human resources.

As we redesign the education system in Qatar, we are simultaneously introducing democratic reform into our political structure. To this end, the Ministry of Information has been dissolved. Censorship has been abolished. Freedom of speech and debate is being encouraged. A municipal council has been elected for its second term with both men and women having the right to stand as candidates and to vote. A referendum has been conducted to consult citizens on the new structural reform, which will be initiated under the new Constitution. Further, the Supreme Council of Education has been established to serve as a comprehensive overseer of all educational institutions, private and governmental, across all levels of schooling. The goal of this Council is to set and enforce comprehensive policies and lessen the autocracy of government-controlled education,

We believe that democracy is not a foreign ideology or alien concept but is innate within the tradition of our Islamic heritage. Democracy has always been an essential element of Islam, which promotes the equality of humankind and decision-making through consultation. Islam requires critical thinking and constructive debate, and condemns misology. To revive the democratic values inherent in the fabric of our society is perfectly in tune with the critical requirements placed on Muslims, who were ordered by Allah to reflect independently on knowledge. Indeed in Surat al-An`am, people are assured, and I quote:

Proofs have come to you from your Lord,

So whosoever sees

Will do so

For the good of his own self,

And

Whosoever blinds himself

Will do so

To his own harm.

And I, Muhammad, am not a watcher over you.

Thus, We explain variously

The verses

So that ...

We make clear for the people who have knowledge.

Misoneism has no place in Islam. Islam encourages us to face innovation with creativity, not fear. Democracy is also compatible with the Islamic valuing of diversity, pluralism and tolerance.

Today's world places the responsibility of peace and cross-cultural understanding squarely upon the shoulders of education and democracy. Upon

examining the history of the relationship between democracy and education, John Dewey declared: "the democratic ideal of education is a farcical, yet tragic, delusion". Though the tragedies of our failures still haunt us, I strongly believe Dewey despaired too soon. We will never allow the democratic ideal of education to remain a delusion but will continue working to make it a global reality.

To this end we need a strong, international forum to discuss the relationship between democracy and education. As a global community, we have organizations that monitor trade, the free market, human rights, etc. Why can we not have an organization to promote the dynamic growth of education through democracy and democracy through education? Such a forum would allow global interaction that can only increase the potential of societies to relate to each other on equal and dignified terms. Such a forum would facilitate the work of organizations such as UNESCO and be conducive to research and global policy-making which promote democracy and education.

For example, for some time the world's attention has been focused on Iraq. Had we had an international forum for education, we would have been able to diagnose Iraq's educational needs and offer appropriate and timely assistance. In Qatar, we have watched the struggle of the Iraqi people with sorrow and empathy and, although we could not change the causes of this anguish, we can now offer a venue of relief to help re-establish the educational infrastructure of a great country. Iraq is a proud country with rich educational resources and throughout its history it has contributed much to the world, especially in terms of art, philosophy and poetry. I believe it is the duty of the international community to stand by Iraq in this troubled time and assist the country through this difficult transition, until it can once again stand as a world leader in education, research, and culture.

It is in this context, of encouraging the practice of global responsibility for education, that I wish to announce today the establishment of the International Fund for Iraqi Higher Education. The objective of this Fund is to provide immediate and long-term assistance for the reconstruction of higher education in Iraq. It is my intention to work closely with international donors to support Iraq as it engineers its own future by taking optimum advantage of the rich resources of its citizens. The first donor to this Fund will be the State of Qatar, which has always been a supporter and advocate of such causes.

Only by transforming the ignorance, hatred and oppression in our world into trust, respect and equality can we progress as a human society. Only by maintaining our cultural integrity as diverse nations with a common commitment to the intellectual, spiritual, physical and emotional development of our citizens and nations can we forge a world worthy of our children. The future of our nations depends not only on knowledge-based education but also on holistic and global education nurtured by the "milk of human kindness", tolerance and creativity. Are we up to the challenge?

Thank you.